2.5
2.2
2.0
2.8
3.2
3.6
4.0
100 mm
1.0
1.1
1.25
1.4
1.6
1.8
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz1234567890
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
1234567890
1.0 mm
1.5 mm
2.0 mm
A5

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 278 732 UD 025 304

AUTHOR Seeley, David S.
TITLE The Choice--Equity Dilemma: A Partial Solution.
INSTITUTION Institute for Responsive Education, Boston, Mass.
REPORT NO IRE-12
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Policy; Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; *Family Income; Family Role; Public Schools; *School Choice; Values

ABSTRACT

Equity and choice are both fundamental goals of democratic education, and yet they are often in conflict. Giving poor families more choice in where they send their children to school would seem to provide immediate expansion of their equal educational opportunity, and yet the various policies that might implement such choices are seen as a serious threat to the health and even survival of a strong public school system, and therefore as ultimately subversive equity for poor families. Educational choice is fundamentally related to the following: (1) the right of families, whether rich or poor, to bring up their children in their own value systems; (2) successful learning; and (3) political empowerment to improve education when it is unsatisfactory. To overcome the inequity that results from poor people's effective lack of choice of private schools or exclusive public schools, education of a high enough quality to obviate parents' desire to choose a private school on grounds of quality alone must be provided, along with school choices that respond to parents' and students' values and concerns. (KH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

UD

ED278732

1-13-87

IRE

THE CHOICE - EQUITY DILEMMA:
A PARTIAL SOLUTION
by
David S. Seeley
IRE REPORT NO. 12

Institute for Responsive Education

605 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02215

UD025304

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. De Carlo
Institute for Responsive Ed.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The dilemmas growing out of the relationship between educational choice and equity are wondrously complex and intriguing. Equity and choice are both fundamental in a democratic society; yet they often seem in conflict. The more choice people have, the more opportunity there is to develop inequality. Yet, to restrict choice in the name of equity seems to cut at the very heart of people's freedom.

In education the conflicts are particularly poignant. Giving poor families more choice in where they send their children to school would seem to provide immediate expansion of their equal educational opportunity, and yet the various policies that might implement such choice are seen as a serious threat to the health and even survival of a strong public school system, and therefore as ultimately subversive of equity for poor families. Both proponents and opponents of vouchers and tuition tax credits couch their arguments in terms of equity.

While the tensions between choice and equity (freedom and equality) can never be fully resolved in a democratic society, I wish to extract from the tangled web of their interrelationship just one line of argument which I hope can yield useful public policy.

Choice and Social Discrimination

The argument begins with what I assume everyone will have to

acknowledge, regardless of their political persuasion or what they make of the fact: the poor people have less educational choice than middle-class or rich people. More affluent families not only have more choice in electing between public and private schools (through their greater resources for private school tuition), but more choice in the public schools their children will attend (through their greater choice of residence).

This second type of choice -- i.e., that among public schools -- is probably quantitatively a greater source of inequality (in terms of the number of students involved multiplied by the disparities in quality of schooling) than the more visible elitism of the exclusive private schools for the rich. The range in quality of public schools is far greater than we like to admit. Not only do some school systems spend more than twice as much as others on their public schools, as revealed in the school finance equity cases of the past fifteen years, but even among schools with comparable budgets, some can compete in quality with the best private schools, while others provide an educational environment that is so bad it must be judged unfit for children's education -- below any reasonable standard anyone could justify. The latter type of public schools are overwhelmingly concentrated in areas serving poor children.

The inequality of affluent families' ability to buy their way into high quality suburban school districts is exacerbated by federal tax policy, which in effect subsidizes their choice

through deductions for local school taxes. Even if our focus, therefore, were limited to the public school system, Horace Mann's ideal of a "common" school for all children of the community seems very distant.

Is this inequality of educational choice between affluent and poor families something that should bother us enough to demand a remedy? After all, rich people have more choice than poor people in all sorts of areas -- food, housing, consumer goods, travel, entertainment, etc. Is poor people's relative lack of educational choice any more unjust and demanding of remedy than the many other inequities of unequal wealth?

Yes it is, I would argue. Education is unlike other services or consumer goods in several essential respects. While we might have to accept that rich people can afford Cadillacs while poor people may be limited to second-hand Chevies or no car at all, education is different. We have already recognized this difference by providing a system of universal free public education, on the ground that children's education is not only a good for the family and child (a private good), but one for the entire society (a public good). Indeed the case for ensuring the provision of an adequate education for all children, regardless of the wealth of their parents, is if anything stronger today than it was in the mid-nineteenth century when the public school crusade overcame the considerable opposition at the time and established our present system of public education. As the

Supreme Court pointed out in its 1954 Brown decision, "In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education."

So we provide free public education to all, regardless of wealth. Leave aside for the moment the poorer quality of public education provided for poor children than for middle and upper-class children (we'll come back to that). Focus instead on the fact that middle and upper-class families also have more educational choice. Is this any more unjust than what happens in areas such as health or housing which are also often provided with little choice when such services or benefits are provided by the government? Let us examine several aspects of education that may help us decide.

Choice and Values

Education deals with children and values. In our society it is presumed that all families, regardless of wealth, have an equal right to bring up their children in their own value systems. There are, to be sure, limits on this right -- for instance regarding child abuse or minimal educational standards -- but these limits are quite broad and, at least in theory, apply to rich and poor alike. Rich and poor have the same right to choose family religious values and practices -- why not educational values and practices? When schooling amounted to only a few months in midwinter in a community-based school this

may have been less of an issue, but now that schooling has assumed such an important role in people's lives, poor people's limitation to whatever an often distant bureaucracy prescribes could be seen as a serious deprivation of a fundamental liberty. Both liberals and conservatives are increasingly concerned about this civil liberties issue.

The Function of Choice

But the problem goes beyond the family values issue. Choice plays a functional role in education. Educational success varies with the degree of parental support, and since choice helps to promote parental support, deprivation of choice reduces the chances of educational success. Those without choice are more likely to be unempowered, passive and even alienated in the educational process. Lack of choice in education, therefore, is not just a limitation on implementing one's private family values, but a deprivation of a governmentally sponsored public good, which the Supreme Court reminded us in Brown "must be made available to all on equal terms."

Choice is functional not only in the process of teaching and learning, but also in the politics of education. As Hirschman has pointed out, those without choice also tend to have less voice in human institutions. Middle and upper-class families' power to "exit" from public schools (the "threat of exit") gives their voice more weight than that of poor families (Hirschman,

1970). No matter how dissatisfied poor families may be, they are pretty much stuck with the public schools -- and usually the poorest public schools. For them public education operates as a monopoly that has little need to satisfy its customers. Not only are educational services for poor families usually of poorer quality, but poor families' lack of choice tends to keep them that way. Poor parents are disempowered politically as well as educationally. As Hirschman points out, the lack of both choice and voice tends to generate "passivity, acquiescence, inaction, withdrawal, and resignation." (1986)

To summarize, then, regarding these special aspects of education together, we find educational choice is fundamentally related to: (1) the right of families to bring up their children in their own value systems, (2) successful learning, and (3) political empowerment to improve education when it is unsatisfactory. In view of all this, it is hard to justify the inequity of educational choice between rich and poor in a society which proclaims the ideal of equal educational opportunity.

A New Policy Framework

Those familiar with my writings are aware that I have proposed a new policy framework for public education with voice, choice and loyalty as its core concepts. If such a policy framework were adopted it would be even clearer that the current inequity in educational choice between rich and poor is a serious

injustice. For then choice would be seen not as peripheral to public education policy, as it is now, but central; and unequal distribution of educational choice would be seen as at least as important a problem as unequal distribution of educational funding or services. But even without such a changed framework, it should be clear enough that we are dealing with something more fundamental than the ordinary inequities of poverty in relation to consumer goods, recreation, travel, etc.

What Can Be Done?

We live in an imperfect world. Not every inequity can be remedied, and some remedies may be worse than the disease. Before we can judge the public policy implications of the above line of argument we have to examine the possible remedies for this particular inequity. There are three main types of remedy -- two of which have already been tried or proposed, and a third which I wish to propose in this paper.

1. One is to deny educational choice to everyone -- make everyone, regardless of wealth, go to public school. This may seem farfetched in today's world, but it was actually tried by the State of Oregon in the 1920s, and in a certain sense comes closer to some of the traditional ideals of public education than our present policy. Horace Mann's dream of having the banker's and farmer's children attend the same "common" school would certainly come closer to realization if middle and upper-class

parents were denied the choice of sending their children to private or exclusive public schools.

But of course this remedy was effectively blocked by the Supreme Court in Pierce v. Society of Sisters in 1925. Since that time there has been no serious challenge to the constitutional right of parental choice of private schools. This leaves us then with the uncomfortable inequity that only those with enough money can effectively exercise what today would probably be recognized as an even more fundamental constitutional right than it was in 1925.

2. A second type of remedy, therefore, is to subsidize those who cannot afford educational choice through some kind of voucher or tuition tax credit. I will not go into detail regarding the pros and cons of these proposals, since they have been and are being debated extensively elsewhere. I will only say here that (1) to the extent such a subsidy would not be offset by increased tuition (a very large question usually left unexamined), it would indeed alleviate the inequity discussed above, and (2) that all of these plans are problematical either in terms of desirability as public policy, effectiveness in producing the desired results, or political feasibility. (For further discussion of my views on the pros and cons of choice plans see Seeley, 1981, Chapter 14.)

3. I want instead to focus on a third type of remedy that

might be appropriate assuming our society, for whatever political or policy reasons, continues to reject compulsory public school attendance for all, and also declines to subsidize choice through vouchers or tuition tax credits -- i.e., so long as it declines to adopt either of the above two remedies. This is indeed our current situation, and may well continue to be so in the future. Yet we have no remedy for, or even agreed-upon principles for addressing, the grave injustice which results from the combination of these two policies. To the extent we stick with public education, allow a constitutional right to choose private schooling, and yet not subsidize choice for the poor, then it seems to me imperative to address the resulting inequity.

In this context I would like to propose two related principles that should guide public education policy:

(1) The quality of public education must be such that parents feel no need to choose a private school on grounds of quality alone.

(2) Public education must provide a wide range of <u>voice</u> and <u>choice</u> within its own schools to respond to parents' and students' values and concerns, limited only by countervailing concerns of legitimate public policy (not just concerns of bureaucratic convenience or majoritarian preference).

To be sure, these are broad principles that cannot be

exactly defined. Some parents' demands for educational quality, voice, or choice may go beyond the practical limits of public education. But clearly many public schools today fall so far below any reasonable reading of these two principles that they can give us useful policy guidelines in a large number of situations. In those cases where we have to debate whether perhaps too much voice, choice, or quality is being provided -- well, those are relatively happy situations compared to many we face today.

The first principle would be considered met in a community where it can be said that few parents feel any need to use private schools except for religious, social, or other reasons unrelated to the quality of the public schools. There are communities where this can be said today. Why not all communities? True, this is not complete equality of choice. Rich people would still have more opportunity to fulfill their religious, social or other values than poor people, but at least there would be an alleviation of the egregious injustice of poor people being confined to inferior public schools in a society which purports to provide free public education for all on an equal basis. And it can be argued that the freer choice of those with money to fulfill these other values falls more into the category of other inequities of wealth that are unfortunate but not intolerable in a free society.

Ah, but how to improve the quality of public schools to meet

this first principle, since so many efforts in the past have failed -- especially for those schools attended by poor children? It is my position that this cannot be done in any case without a good deal more voice and choice in public schools -- voice and choice that can lead to the kind of loyalty that makes for effective education. Loyalty provides a different kind of accountability from the political/bureaucratic accountability on which we mostly now rely in public education. It is direct, face-to-face accountability of people working together on shared goals. It is the kind of accountability that makes private schools often more effective than public schools, even when they cost less or provide seemingly inferior services. It is the main secret as far as I'm concerned of effective public schools, even though this is often obscured in "effective schools" research and programs.

Voice and choice have additional functions, however, beyond the loyalty that can enhance teaching and learning -- functions that give them priority in their own right as part of a just public school system. Voice is an elementary component of democratic government, and, as one of our society's most important public institutions, public schools cannot deny voice without a serious deprivation of democratic values.

As Hirschman has pointed out, voice is particularly important where choice is limited (Hirschman, 1970 and 1986) and it is surely limited in the typical public school situation. We

are beginning to see how little voice has been provided in most public schools now that schools are beginning to take steps to open up voice. School officials who have grown used to living without the voice of parents, students, or teachers are often frightened at the prospect of increased voice, and after a long silence, the first voices heard are not always pleasant or helpful; but once constructive channels have been opened -- through school site councils, effective parent-teacher conferences, classroom discussion, periodic one-to-one teacher/student conversations, public forums and surveys, etc. -- school people find that they can have a much more satisfying professional experience than they now have in our voiceless bureaucratic systems. Students and parents also can have much more satisfying and productive relations with schools where voice is present.

Choice, however, also can be much more a part of public education than it has been. School systems are finding that providing options for parents, students and teachers can greatly enhance the sense of ownership and commitment of all educational participants. Mary Anne Raywid has done a good job of reviewing the research on the methods and benefits of increased choice within public education (1984). Choice not only enhances motivation, but also provides the leeway to deal with diverse values, learning styles and life goals that are often ignored in "the one best system."

A public school system which really respects the voice and choice of parents, students, teachers and citizens would be quite different from most public school systems today, and the results would not necessarily satisfy everyone. Both liberals and conservatives might find that their own formulas for what is best for all children might have to bend to take account of the values of individual educational participants. But since citizens' collective voices must also be listened to, there is still room for the political process to argue for limitations on individual choices in the name of publicly defined goods at the local, state or even federal level.

A public school system that provides high quality learning experiences for all children and a wide range of voice and choice, can overcome a large part of the inequity that results from poor people's effective lack of choice of private or exclusive public schools. In this imperfect world it may not be possible to do more than this. But to do less is an intolerable injustice and a threat to the legitimacy of public education.

References

Hirschman, Albert O. Exit, Voice and Loyalty. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970.

Hirschman, Albert O. Rival Views of Market Society and Other Essays. New York: Viking, 1986. (Page numbers unavailable at this date).

Raywid, Mary Anne. "Synthesis of Research on Schools of Choice." Educational Leadership. April 1984, pp. 71-78.

Seeley, David S. Education Through Partnership. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1981.

David S. Seeley has dealt with the policy problems of American public education for thirty years, first as an attorney for the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, then as Assistant U.S. Commissioner of Education for Equal Educational Opportunity, later as education adviser to New York City's Mayor John Lindsay, and from 1969 to 1980 as the Director of the Public Education Association of New York City. He is currently an educational consultant and Adjunct Professor at the College of Staten Island, CUNY. He is the author of Education Through Partnership, Ballinger, 1981.